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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal God, we love You. You are our rock, fortress, and deliverer. You have provided protection for our Nation, surrounding it with the shield of Your favor. How worthy You are of our praise.

Strengthen our lawmakers for today's journey. Give them strong hearts, sound minds, and diligent hands. May they do their ethical best to represent You, joining their plans to Your will in order to accomplish Your purposes. Incline their hearts to Your wisdom and love as You keep them on the path of integrity.

We pray in Your sacred Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. PAUL). The majority leader is recognized.

SCHEDULE

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, today the Senate is continuing to consider S. 1, a bill to approve the Keystone XL Pipeline, and there are six amendments pending, three from each side. We will begin voting on those amendments as soon as Chairman MURKOWSKI and Senator CANTWELL work

out an orderly schedule. Senators should expect votes throughout the day in relation to these amendments and any others in the queue.

POSITIVE CHANGES FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, last night, the American people heard two very different addresses. One was focused on the middle class and how Washington can work together in a serious way for better jobs, higher wages, and more opportunity. It was a call for constructive cooperation. It was a call for new ideas.

I wish to commend Senator ERNST for her thoughtful address. She understands the needs of working people in a way those of a particular mindset in Washington simply don't understand. She knows that the middle class is looking for Washington to function again and that hard-working Americans want DC to focus on their needs instead of the demands of powerful special interests. That is just what they told us in November when they sent this new Republican Congress here on their behalf.

I was hoping for something similar from President Obama—not identical, of course. We don't agree on all the issues; that is clear enough. But there are enough areas of common ground where we should be able to work together. It would have been most constructive if he had put the focus of his address on those areas of potential agreement. The moment of high purpose called for the leader of the free world to show America what could be accomplished through constructive, bipartisan engagement.

The State of the Union can be about more than veto threats or strident partisanship. This kind of partisanship is what we have become accustomed to from the President. We know the President may not be wild about the people's choice of a Congress, but he owes

it to the American people to find a serious way to work with the representatives they elected.

On some issues, such as cyber security, he sent a positive sign. He also began what I hope will be a sustained effort to move his own party forward to encourage them to work with us to help create more jobs by breaking down foreign trade barriers and allowing America to sell more of what it makes and grows.

Those were the good signs. But that was only part of the speech. There is not a lot serious lawmakers can do with talking points designed specifically not to pass. Members in both parties would have welcomed serious ideas about how to save and strengthen Medicare, how to protect Social Security for future generations, and how to balance the budget without tired tax hikes.

We listened closely for specific details on how he would work with both parties to achieve comprehensive tax simplification that focuses not on growing the government but on creating jobs.

The President has expressed some support for ideas such as this previously. He should have expanded on it last night. There is still time for him to do it. But whatever he chooses, the new Congress will continue working to send good ideas to his desk.

One of those good ideas is a bipartisan infrastructure project the Senate will resume working on today—the Keystone jobs bill. It is heartening to see a real debate and an amendment process on the floor of the Senate again. It is a result of a new spirit of reform that is being brought to Congress. It aims to give Members of both parties a stake in positive solutions so we can get Washington functioning again on behalf of our people.

We are looking to the President to join us in our positive mission for the middle class. It is what the American people just voted for last November. It

• This “bullet” symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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is what Senator ERNST articulated so well last night. And if the President is willing to put the veto threats away and the designed-to-fail talking points aside, we can still cooperate to get some smart things done for the people we represent.

RECOGNITION OF THE ACTING MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant Democratic leader is recognized.

PROGRESS FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, last night the President talked about the economy and the progress we have made. The United States grew 2.6 percent last year, and in the third quarter alone our economy grew by 5 percent. Nearly 3 million jobs were created—the best year for the U.S. labor market since the height of the economic boom under President Bill Clinton. Lower gasoline prices are providing relief to many families and consumer confidence is up. The deficit has been cut in half.

Yet we know that while the economy is growing and unemployment is declining, sadly, much of the benefit is going to those at the very top of the ladder. The top 1 percent of American wage earners saw 49 percent of the decline in incomes during the recession, but they have seen 95 percent of the income gained since the recovery started. Let me repeat that. The top 1 percent of wage earners have seen 95 percent of the gains since our economy has recovered.

The gap between wages for low-income and middle-income families and those at the top is staggering. Forty-seven people in America own more than 160 million Americans combined. That has to change.

This isn't just a Democratic observation. Even Republicans have publicly agreed with us that working families are falling behind. Let me quote a few. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a potential candidate for President, said: "Here's reality: If you're fortunate enough to count yourself among the privileged, much of the rest of the Nation is drowning." Jeb Bush said that.

Mitt Romney, a former Republican candidate for President and perhaps a Republican candidate for President again—here is what he said last week as he has rekindled his dream for the Presidency: "... the rich have gotten richer, income inequality has gotten worse, and there are more people in poverty than ever before."

Even Speaker JOHN BOEHNER said this in an interview:

The top third of America are doing pretty good. The bottom two-thirds are really being squeezed.

So how do we address these challenges? Our parties look at it differently.

The Republican majority in this Chamber had to pick the first bill they would bring to the floor of the Senate once they reached the majority. There were a lot of initiatives they could have considered. We know what they chose—the Keystone XL Pipeline—a pipeline owned by a Canadian company. That is the No. 1 priority of the Republicans in the Senate, bar none. When they wanted to respond to President Obama's State of the Union Address with Senator ERNST of Iowa, they focused on the Keystone XL Pipeline. What a limited vision of the future—one pipeline.

Then we took two votes yesterday on this pipeline, and it started to become clear what this pipeline is all about. It is moving Canadian tar sands from Canada, through the United States, and to a refinery in Texas. We learned yesterday the Republicans will not even support the proposition that the refined oil products coming out of this refinery will help America.

We had a simple amendment Senator MARKEY of Massachusetts offered which said that at the end of the pipeline, the refinery's oil products will be sold in America. The Republicans defeated that amendment. So all this argument about how this oil out of this pipeline is going to help our economy in the future? Nope, don't expect it to happen. Yesterday's overwhelming Republican vote made it clear.

There was a second part that was considered yesterday. This bill—the No. 1 priority of the Senate Republican majority—is going to build a pipeline, that is for sure. We said, good, if it is going to be built, use American steel in building the pipeline. That is not an outrageous suggestion. If this is such a priority for the Republicans, wouldn't they want to put Americans to work to make the steel to build the pipeline? We offered that as an amendment yesterday. Senator FRANKEN offered that amendment and the Republicans rejected it. The Republicans rejected the premise that the steel that goes into the most important pipeline in the history of America, from their point of view, should actually come from America. That is the second amendment we considered.

This special interest project, the Keystone XL Canadian-owned pipeline, is going to continue to be the No. 1 dominant issue in the Senate for days to come.

Republicans plan to do everything they can to help build a pipeline, but they want to deny millions of Americans access to health care. That is what the House Republicans have come up with. They want to come up with a plan that will literally take away the coverage of health care from Americans. Is there anyone in this country who thinks that is the right thing for our future? We are trying to reduce the number of uninsured. The Republican changes to the Affordable Care Act would increase the number of uninsured and increase the number of

Americans dependent on government-sponsored health care. It doesn't sound like a Republican idea to me, but it is. That is what is coming from the House of Representatives.

There are pretty clear differences in how we help working families. For the Senate Republicans, it is to build a Canadian pipeline. Don't use American steel, don't keep the oil in America, but build this pipeline—No. 1 priority. The House Republicans take away health insurance coverage for hundreds of thousands of Americans at a time when we know that leaves people in a precarious position.

Here is what the President said last night: We want to make certain we focus on projects and programs and new ideas that can leave our children a better world and our grandchildren as well. Do we want an economy where everyone has an opportunity to climb that economic ladder or do we want a world where those who are born into lives of luxury set the rules and always come out ahead? Do we want an economy that rewards those who work hard and play by the rules or an economy where corporations rig the game so it is tails you lose, heads I win?

We know that an economy with a strong middle class is key to growing America. Yet it is becoming harder and harder for families to even reach the middle class. Working families aren't looking for a handout—not in my State. They just want a chance for a better life for their kids.

There is a way we can do this. It is called the earned-income tax credit. This is an idea supported by Republican Presidents in the past. Historically both parties have supported it. The earned-income tax credit is designed to encourage work by providing a tax credit to working families.

The President's proposal, similar to one that SHERROD BROWN and I have introduced, would expand the credit to help the only group that our Tax Code pushes into poverty: childless workers. What a difference this would make for millions of working families, the difference between paying a heating bill or putting it off, the difference between getting a prescription filled or waiting. A small refundable tax credit for these workers can make a bigger difference than many U.S. Senators would ever realize.

The President also proposed making 2 years of community college free for responsible students and giving motivated students a path to a solid educational foundation without debt. This is not a Democratic idea. The President acknowledged last night that this idea came from a Republican Governor in Tennessee. I might add that a Democratic mayor, Rahm Emanuel of Chicago, has a similar program, but the President went to Tennessee to acknowledge that the Republican legislature and the Republican Governor had come up with a good idea. So to argue this is somehow a partisan idea, it sure isn't in Tennessee. If it is partisan, it is a Republican partisan idea.